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TO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME IMMEDIATE 2603  
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE 9567  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID IMMEDIATE 2784  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 8095  
INFO RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 1505  
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 7949  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 6622  
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 5703  
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY 1660  
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 1677  
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 5824  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3409  
RHMFSS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFSS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 STATE 105467

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/01/2019  
TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR MOPS KPKO IT LE IS  
SUBJECT: UNIFIL: BUCKING UP THE ITALIANS

REF: A. ROME 1119  
    1B. USUN 866  
    1C. BEIRUT 1051  
    1D. LEAF/HALL-IRWIN EMAILS 09/24/09-09/30/09  
    1E. ROME DAILY REPORT 09/09/09

Classified By: NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is an action request. See paragraphs three through six.

Summary

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¶2. (C/NF) Summary. We want to prevent a significant drawdown of Italy's contribution to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), a linchpin of the post-2006 ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. Due to budget constraints and lukewarm interest from the Berlusconi cabinet, Italy is considering withdrawing up to 1,000 of its 2,300 troops over the objections of senior-level officials in the ministries of defense and foreign affairs.

Objectives

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¶3. (C/REL ITALY) We request that Embassy Rome engage Prime Minister Berlusconi, Foreign Minister Frattini, and Defense Minister La Russa to urge that Italy maintain its current contingent of 2,300 troops and to support an extension of Italy's command of UNIFIL. Embassy Rome should tailor the points below as needed to most effectively influence each interlocutor.

-- Reiterate President Obama's message, delivered to Berlusconi at the first-of-its-kind September 23 meeting with top UN peacekeeping troop contributors on the margins of the UN General Assembly, that we are grateful for Italy's contribution to UNIFIL and that it has led Europe's "return to UN peacekeeping."

-- Praise General Graziano's command of UNIFIL, his dogged efforts to discharge his mandate, and his stewardship of Israeli-Lebanese military interaction. We believe this channel could provide a foundation for expanded discussions on the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1701 and the possible renewal of an Israel-Lebanon armistice, in

which Italy could play a key role.

-- Express support for Lebanon's request that Italy retain command of UNIFIL for another six to twelve months in order to provide a measure continuity as Lebanon's new government struggles to its feet. We will inform the UN that we back the extension of Italy's command under General Graziano or a suitable replacement.

-- Request that Italy maintain the size of its contingent while it remains in command of UNIFIL. We view Italy's 2,300 troops as the backbone of UNIFIL; they are among the best trained and most effective in the force. Italy's large, high-profile presence also comforts the Israelis and helps prevent provocations by Hezbollah and other armed groups. UNIFIL, at its current strength and composition, remains critical to preserving stability in south Lebanon and calm along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

-- Urge Italy to minimize troop cuts even after command passes to Spain. Note that we will also press Spain to increase the size of its contingent once in command of UNIFIL to avoid a significant disparity between the Italian and Spanish contributions. We understand Italy will likely withdraw its 300-strong headquarters unit during the handover.

-- Recognize the equally important contributions and

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sacrifices of Italian troops in Afghanistan, but urge against undercutting one mission to bolster the other. (If raised: Maintaining Italy's contribution in Afghanistan is our top priority. If cuts must be made to Italy's deployments abroad, we would prefer they be made in Lebanon, but we hope Italy will find a way to maintain both commitments.)

-- Note that Italy's large contribution to UNIFIL is a significant driver of our close coordination with Italy on Lebanon and wider regional issues.

¶4. (C/REL ISRAEL) We request that Embassy Tel Aviv encourage senior Israeli officials to join us in lobbying the Italians and may draw upon the above points in pursuing the following objectives.

-- Ask Israel to join us in supporting Lebanon's request that Italy extend its command of UNIFIL and to communicate its position to Italy and the UN.

-- Urge Israel to press Italy to avoid cuts to its UNIFIL contingent while it retains command and to minimize any drawdown after the transition to Spanish command. Ask that Israel highlight its particular confidence in UNIFIL's Italian troops and the negative perceptual impact of a shrinking of UNIFIL's largest European contingent.

¶5. (C/REL SPAIN) We request that Embassy Madrid approach Spanish officials to discuss the UNIFIL handover and may draw upon the above points in pursuing the following objectives.

-- Ascertain whether Spain and Italy have agreed to a handover date and post-handover troop levels.

-- Urge Spain to work with Italy to avoid any reduction in the overall number of European troops in UNIFIL.

¶6. (C/REL UN) We request that USUN approach appropriate officials in the UN Secretariat to signal our support for Lebanon's request that Italy extend its command of UNIFIL.

-- Note that, without prejudice to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operation's decisions on UNIFIL command, we support in principle Lebanon's request that Italy extend its command of UNIFIL, especially if this prevents a net reduction of European troops in UNIFIL.

-- Emphasize, without prejudging the ongoing internal review of UNIFIL's force structure, that the significant number of well-trained European troops in south Lebanon helps to deter hostile acts and bolster Israel's sense of security.

Reporting Deadline

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¶17. Posts are requested to report the results of this demarche to Matthew Irwin in NEA/ELA and LTC Douglas Bell in IO/PSC by October 14, 2009.

Background

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¶18. (C/NF) Italy is considering withdrawing as many as 1,000 of 2,300 Italian troops in Lebanon due to budget constraints and disinterest on the part of the Berlusconi government, which has long viewed UNIFIL as a project of the previous Prodi government. Senior staff at the ministries of defense and foreign affairs object to the proposed troop cuts and have quietly sought our intervention with their ministers and Berlusconi, believing Italy can be persuaded to maintain its contribution with a nudge from both the United States and Israel.

¶19. (C/NF) At the same time, Spain has pocketed Italy's agreement not to oppose its bid to take command of UNIFIL in 2010 without agreeing to plus up its own contingent. In order to avoid a significant reduction in the number of European troops in UNIFIL, a key barometer for both Israel

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and would-be troublemakers in Lebanon of international resolve to maintain calm in south Lebanon, we are willing to support Lebanon's request that Italy delay handing over command to Spain. Our support is not explicitly conditioned on, but would ideally lead to, a decision by Italy to forego troop cuts so long as it remains in command of UNIFIL.

¶10. (C/NF) After the transition to Spanish command, we expect Italy to withdraw its 300-strong headquarters unit from UNIFIL, but we would like to minimize further cuts. However Italy, as all troop contributors, wants to avoid the burden of maintaining the largest contingent without retaining the prestige of command. Ideally, Italy and Spain would be persuaded to meet in the middle, with each contingent stabilizing at 1,700-2,000 troops. We will engage the Spanish government once a handover date has been set.

CLINTON